

This article was published in the September 2005 issue of Toronto Builder, the magazine of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association.
(Certain statistics have been updated since publication and some street names have changed as planning progresses.)

Is Rudy Bratty Crazy, Or What?

By Bob Strupat

Let's start with some facts.

One: The Remington Group, led by Rudy Bratty and his brother Jerry, owns 243 acres of undeveloped land in the middle of Markham.

Two: Markham is the fastest growing municipality in the fastest growing region in the fastest growing province.

Three: If Remington had done the same-old, same-old – which it has been doing with considerable success for more than half a century – years ago this site would have been transformed into a traditional low density subdivision of single-family homes.

Four: Sure, that means every day a couple of thousand more people would be commuting by car to someplace else, adding to traffic congestion throughout the Greater Toronto Area – but Remington's bottom line would be richer by at least another zillion dollars.

Five: But, no, Bratty intends to build a unique 10 million sq. ft. high-intensity, mixed-use *urban* community here with homes for 9,500 people and jobs for 16,000 people – in the very heart of the suburbs.

Six: Most of Bratty's colleagues in the land development and home building industries think he's nuts.

And yet if Bratty really has lost it, the mayor of Markham should also be fitted for a straightjacket because he is 100 per cent behind the concept. And start preparing several padded rooms for Premier McGuinty and his entire cabinet, because this is exactly how the province wants to accommodate the 100,000 newcomers who are streaming into the GTA each and every year.

The past is over and done with

Love or hate the suburbs, one thing is clear: they are not sustainable. We cannot forever build further and further into the countryside – rendering people entirely car dependent, eating up more and more precious farmland, obliterating the natural environment, and demanding continual public expenditure for new roads, sewers, schools and hospitals.

We've seen pretty much nothing but low density development in the suburban GTA since the late '40s and the chickens are coming home to roost...on the roofs of our SUVs gridlocked on the Don Valley Parking Lot. There is no long-term future in more of this.

If you believe the underlying message of the sobering TV documentary, *The End of Suburbia*, there may not be a future even for what is already built. Traditional suburbs are totally dependent on abundant, cheap gasoline but world oil production is about to peak, meaning energy costs will relentlessly rise, rise and rise for evermore.

Markham saw much of this coming over a decade ago, when it started a process to radically re-invent itself by creating Markham Centre, a compact area where people could actually live and work and shop and entertain themselves without having to leave town.

This is also about when Bratty rejected the prevailing belief that the future of his company and his industry depended on sticking to business as usual no matter what challenges the real world might be facing.

This is when Remington decided to adopt a different development philosophy based on smart growth principles: dedicated to building communities, not just buildings; tackling the really tough suburban issues, especially the alienating, unproductive, energy-inefficient and costly daily commute; and concentrating people into spirited communities where they are encouraged to mix and mingle.

Lots of people. So many that street life would flourish day and night; so many that sidewalks would be animated, not just windswept spaces between roads and strip plaza parking lots; so many that the bustle would attract others to join in, not just past through; so many that it would become economical to provide public transit, opening the door to people from all levels of society and from all over the GTA.

The future is all about sustainability

What Remington intends to do with its Downtown Markham project is offer residents, employers and employees, shoppers, visitors, even tourists, a reason to come to Markham, stay in Markham, or return to Markham time and time again.

Forget your isolated shopping malls engulfed by a hostile sea of parked cars. Forget your big-box retail outlets whose parking lots gobble up acres of land and sit dark and desolate outside of business hours. Forget your single-family homes on curvy roads and cul-de-sacs, withdrawn behind expansive, lonely lawns.

Downtown Markham rejects all of that. Instead, the master plan is based on an urban model, incorporating ideas from the best cities and neighbourhoods around the world.

The central idea is increased density. This doesn't portend skyscraping bank towers – in fact the highest building in Downtown Markham will be only 13 storeys – but it does demand concentration, proximity, compactness and intimacy.

Buildings will be close together and smack up to the sidewalk, easy to look into or get into, forming the walls of the virtual “outdoor rooms” where street life can ignite – enlivened by sidewalk cafes, little plazas and squares where one can see and be seen, benches in parkettes designed to spark a spontaneous game of chess...the kind of environment that makes for a people place.

Why go someplace else?

Downtown Markham is a series of precincts, each with its own character and flavour. At the heart of it all is a 10-acre central park, an active gathering place that will become the social and cultural focus for all of Markham.

Most precincts will contain some residential, employment and shopping elements, no matter what their predominant use, so that everywhere within Downtown Markham people will find whatever they need close at hand.

Each area is linked to each other by the unique park-like Simcoe Promenade that runs all the way through the community and will one day provide a route for rapid transit to tie Downtown Markham to other major centres in the rest of the GTA.

On the west, along Warden Avenue, are mostly residential and park uses. At the south, bordering on Highway 407, is the commercial district, an urban office park. On the east approaching the Unionville GO Station is another residential neighbourhood and a site for two schools. The north edge of the community overlooks the Rouge River valley and provides links to natural areas and regional parks.

What makes the whole thing work is its *urbanity* – how the master plan replaces parking lots with piazzas and transforms disconnected motorists into engaged pedestrians.

What makes the whole thing come alive is the downtown core, an intensive mixed-use residential, shopping, dining and entertainment precinct where people can do what they do best: interact with each other.

There is a profound difference between a public street lined with shops and a private “shopping complex” like your typical enclosed mall. You don’t need to be an urban planner to appreciate the difference – from personal experience, we all know that people are more sociable in a street market than in a supermarket.

This set of super blocks located just west of the central park extends from the edge of the Rouge River valley south to the beginning of the commercial district.

It will be anchored at the north by a boutique hotel and spa where gardens will spill out into the valley, inviting guests to explore nature paths, hiking trails and adjoining parks. A destination wellness centre will attend not just to the quality of your complexion but the quality of your nutrition, health and entire lifestyle.

Beside and across from the hotel, luxury condominiums will offer great views into the valley and quick access to all the downtown amenities.

High Street, the most intense shopping street in Downtown Markham, leads south to The Piazza. As you stroll past the big brand retailers, local specialty shops, restaurants and cafes, you can be forgiven for thinking you’ve been transported to some European city centre.

Occasionally breaking the retail frontage will be lobbies for condos rising above. But they’ll be stepped back into the block so that at street level people will be find the setting comfortable and accommodating.

It's what the planners call human scale. In some city centres you can sprain your neck looking up at skyscrapers while in some suburban town centres you can strain your eyes trying to find the closest neighbouring building.

The square, ringed by colonnaded shops and restaurants, is entered from the west by passing beneath an arching gateway building with a restaurant and several floors of apartments above. This is the place to people watch or take part in fairs, festivals, fashion shows, seasonal celebrations or civic events.

At the east end of the square, a two-storey walk-through pavilion may entice you to pause in its restaurant, bar or bistro. It will become the meeting place for all of the downtown, luring shoppers into the central park and park-goers into the downtown.

The central park is still in the planning stages but has an ambitious mandate to become an active people place with various attractions or facilities that will give people a reason to return time and again at all seasons of the year.

Parkside Drive, along the west side of the park, is entirely residential, with the sidewalk punctuated by condo canopies and attentive doormen. Walk-up townhomes with terraced condominiums above will have spectacular views into the park and will give the park a safe and friendly edge.

South of the piazza, High Street continues as a pedestrian promenade, passing through The Gallery, a shop-lined outdoor glass-covered arcade, on the way to Simcoe Promenade and across it to the cinemas, theatres, restaurants, bars, nightclubs and various sport emporia of the entertainment district.

Smart growth is a challenge

Smart growth projects like Downtown Markham are harder to build, are riskier for the developer, require a leap of faith by the community, and make demands on the retailers and office tenants who decide to locate in them.

But that's what it takes to create a place where "live, shop, work and play" can rise above wishful thinking to actually describe what's going on.

So, let's finish with some more facts.

Seven: In the suburban GTA today, well over 90 per cent of all trips are by car, whether for work, play, shopping or any purpose. At any given time, almost 80 per cent of all drivers in the GTA are alone in their cars.

Eight: If development patterns do not change, in the next 30 years an area of farmland twice the size of Toronto will disappear; gridlock will get worse, increasing commuting times by 45 per cent; and air quality will further decline because auto emissions will increase by 42 per cent.

Nine: Ontario has recently issued strict growth management rules – containing sprawl and forcing new development into compact, intensive centres already served by infrastructure and capable of being served by rapid transit.

Ten: Markham Centre is one of the sites designated for concentrated growth by the provincial government.

Is Rudy Bratty crazy?

Or is he crazy like a fox?

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This sidebar was published in the September 2005 issue of Toronto Builder, the magazine of the Greater Toronto Home Builders' Association.

Retailing heads back to the future

By Bob Strupat

In the beginning, there were stores. And it was good – because you could ride your horse right up to the front door. Soon there were lots of stores side-by-side on a main street, for your added shopping convenience.

In the fullness of time, there were strip plazas, discount emporia, enclosed malls, regional malls, power centres, town centres, and today's craze, lifestyle centres.

What's next?

Lots of stores side-by-side on a main street. Retailing is coming full circle.

Downtown Markham – which is *not* a lifestyle centre even though it will probably be labelled as one – stands as an example of how retailing is heading back to its roots.

This new 10 million square foot urban community in the heart of Markham includes about 460,000 sq. ft. of retail space, most of it clustered in a shopping and entertainment district at the core of the mixed-use development, adjoining a 10-acre central park.

Because it is adjacent to Highway 407 and close to several major GTA arterial roads, this is “big box” heaven. But enclosed malls, power centres and any other retail type that would result in a handful of isolated buildings surrounded by thousands of parked cars simply won't do.

Instead of building just a shopping destination, The Remington Group and Markham itself opted for a smart growth mixed-use future where there will be vibrant street life, sociable squares and parks, and a sense of community that won't come to a crashing halt at the mall-closing hour.

Coincidentally, it appears that mixed-use development with a healthy balance of homes, jobs, shops, entertainment and amenities represents the future of retailing.

Retail Traffic magazine recently asked a group of experts what might be the successor to lifestyle centres, the hottest retail phenomenon of the last several years.

“After dealing with hour-long work commutes, why spend more valuable time driving to shop?” answered Mitch Smith, president of Mulvanny G2 Architecture of Bellevue, Washington, the tenth largest architectural firm in the U.S. “A blended or mixed-use direction, as an integrated part of the their community, will attract and retain loyal shoppers.”

Dale Ciapetti, senior designer at Carter & Burgess, Inc., a large U.S. engineering, architectural and consulting firm based in Fort Worth, Texas, agreed. “Recent studies suggest that the shoppers and consumers of today are really hearkening back to their own childhood experiences and want to seek out the next-generation retail environment as a true community or town centre experience.”

What lifestyle centres are, and aren't

Lifestyle centres, just now showing up in Canada, are often described as open-air malls, meaning the stores are not inside a single building but stand individually on a street, each with its own address. These centres are almost always located near affluent communities and they feature upscale national brand and specialty stores.

They offer entertainment and leisure pursuits beyond shopping, and are known for their harmonious ambiance. This is often achieved by the application of consistent themed architecture, which is almost always historically inappropriate and artificial.

Nevertheless, they are popular with shoppers. A few years ago there were only a couple of dozen of them in North America. By the end of last year there were 120. In 2005 and 2006, 20 to 40 additional lifestyle centres will open, compared to just eight regional malls.

They're also popular with owners and investors. According to the International Council of Shopping Centers, shoppers average 57 minutes at a lifestyle centre, compared to 78 minutes in an enclosed mall, but spend \$84 per hour, compared to less than \$58 an hour at malls.

Even traditional malls are trying to cash in on the public desire for a more comprehensive and satisfying shopping experience.

Yorkdale has just added a 300 ft. long glass-covered galleria to give the impression that part of the mall is outside. Their goal was an “open air” feel, even in the heart of one of Canada’s largest and most successful enclosed malls.

Don Mills Centre is about to rebuild, by adding 600 homes and re-creating at least part of the mall as an outdoor lifestyle centre. Developer Cadillac Fairview is going to rename it Don Mills Town Centre and hopes it will become a gathering place and focal point for the local and adjacent neighbourhoods.

Vaughan Mills, a new and traditional enclosed mall in York Region that features lower priced goods, hopes to extend its appeal by including a number of “interactive” features including a NASCAR SpeedPark (two indoor tracks with electric cars for side-by-side racing), a Bass Pro Shop with a 24,000 gallon aquarium, and an outdoor amusement area with miniature golf and bumper boats.

Downtown Markham is the real deal

Shopping in Downtown Markham will be open air, because all the stores are located individually on streets, not far from homes, jobs, entertainment, parks and other typical urban amenities. However, it won’t have a faux style, so no one will have to wonder exactly when Markham’s past included a Mediterranean period.

But because this downtown is being built from scratch, there are opportunities to apply some of the most successful mall and lifestyle centre retailing principles.

For instance, the main shopping street and the large open square that it leads to will be established as private condominium space under the management of the project developer, even though for all intents and purposes they are part of the public realm.

This will allow the street and square to be built and maintained to higher than usual municipal standards. More frequent cleaning, trash removal and snow clearing are obvious examples. Preventing skateboarders from crashing into strollers and keeping sidewalks free of beggars are behind-the-scenes benefits to ensure a comfortable and secure environment for all.

The arrangement provides considerable flexibility for events such as seasonal festivities or civic celebrations on short notice. It also allows the developer to establish and maintain a healthy and ever-changing tenant mix so that retailers thrive and shoppers are better served.

Private control of this limited section of the public realm is what really excites Denis Gervais, a retail designer with GHA shoppingscapes based in Montreal. “This is a social and political shift taking place in many North American cities. People are retiring earlier and want to enjoy a lifestyle that includes first class public amenities. In many areas, they want more than municipalities can provide.”

In the rest of Markham’s new downtown, the underlying urban plan and individual building architecture will combine to create streets where the sidewalks welcome pedestrians and where some curb parking is available right in front of shops. Most parking will be in parking structures, some beneath the main shopping district and square.

“It would have been a lot easier and a lot less expensive to build a typical suburban mall with surface parking,” says Rudy Buczolits, Remington’s vice-president of land development. “But that would run counter to the development of a true mixed-use centre where people find pleasure in being on the street and in the parks.”

As a \$3 billion, 20-year mixed-use development, Downtown Markham will be a lot of different things to a lot of people, but how the shopping experience unfolds is one of the keys to creating a true people place.

The future of Markham and the future of retailing appear to have a lot in common.

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